

04.24.22 John 20: 19 - 31

It has been years since that event we call resurrection. Decades perhaps, and John is writing for second and third generation believers about that day. I understand that our current knowledge of eye-witness testimony is that it is unreliable in court. But John's recollection isn't that. He has memorized the account of that entire day well into the evening. His culture stressed the oral tradition much more than we do today. Sociologists have studied the remarkable accuracy of this practice, the oral tradition among non-literate cultures.¹ People remember very well, especially when that memory is shared in a family, a group, a community of faith. We tell stories around the table of family events, and if I am telling it incorrectly, I am corrected sometimes by Gwen, sometimes by one of our adult children, Dana or Drew. The story I tell isn't my story alone; it is our family story, and it is remembered with amazing clarity to be told and told again.

So tell us, John, what happened? It is the evening of the first day - Easter evening. John remembers it well, when the Risen Jesus was suddenly, quietly standing with the disciples. There is no way to understand how this happened. The door was locked and one of the ten disciples (Judas is dead and Thomas was not there) saw movement out of the corner of his eye and there was Jesus, except they did not recognize him at first. Add to the mystery of how did he enter a locked room, the mystery of his hidden appearance (hiding in plain sight) The Gaelic Rune of Hospitality:

There is no doubt in John's memory that this stranger was real, he stood there with both feet on the floor, not hovering a few inches like a ghost. Now a third mystery - he spoke and they still do not know who it is. (How shocked are they; how entrenched in grief despite the reports of an empty tomb and staggering account of Mary Magdalen's encounter with the one she thought was a gardener in the early morning, but who was the Risen Christ. It is only after he shows them his hands, his side - the marks of the crucifixion that they know whom they see and are happy.

Such a moment etched in the memory, to be sure. There is more. Hearing Jesus bless them with peace; Receiving the Holy Spirit. Hearing him send them out to carry on his work. All made possible because they saw his hands and side, and in that seeing came to believe that person among them was the one crucified.

But Thomas wasn't there, and when he returned he heard all about it. He heard it so many times according to the Greek word translated 'told' is to be understood. Repeatedly. Heard it so much that in exasperation he pushes back - "Prove it. Show me these scars on his hands. No wait, more than that, I want to touch them and put my hand into his side wound as well!" You have heard it said "Be careful what you pray for!" 8 days later his prayer is answered, when once again, the door is locked and Jesus is among them, blessing the 10 with peace, but turning to Thomas (*can you imagine that!*) offering his hands, his side, his 'proof' "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

So my friends, my sisters and brothers in the Lord, like the disciples before us, we receive our blessing from the Risen Lord. Maybe not in the same manner, maybe we don't feel his breath on our cheek as he greets us, because in my imagination, that is how it happened in that locked room when Jesus was

¹ as included in Kenneth Bailey's many books on the teachings of Jesus in parables.

found among them: Embracing them they felt his breath as he spoke "Receive the Holy Spirit." What is the result of this gift of the Holy Spirit? It is the call to forgive, and the consequences of not forgiving. Forgiveness is our superpower as Spirit-filled believers, and it is a superpower that comes with a cost. (scars of forgiveness here?)

Forgiveness - what a wonderful, joyful gift we have been given to share! Forgiveness is the sweet kiss of your child upon your face after you have been short-tempered and cross, but she says to you, "That's alright, Daddy; I love you anyway." You see the costliness of her forgiveness in the tears in her eyes as she speaks her words with her arms wrapped around your neck. You feel her breath of love on your skin.

Forgiveness is the phone call from your spouse you take while at work because he wants to know if you are alright after you left the breakfast table in a silent rage, If you have ever made on of those calls, you know it is taking risk because you aren't sure 1) if the call will go through, and 2) who will be on the other end - Goldilocks or the big bad wolf.

It can cost plenty to forgive yourself when the person you think you are is the last person to deserve to be forgiven. But like the disciples before us, who did not deserve to be forgiven, who looked into the mirror and saw the foolish decisions of youth, of age, or pride and desire. "What kind of God forgives one such as I am?" you ask yourself. Calvin's conversion...

'God in his secret providence finally curbed and turned me in another direction. At first, although I was so obstinately given to the superstitions of the papacy, that it was extremely difficult to drag me from the depths of the mire, yet by a sudden conversion He (God) tamed my heart and made it teachable, this heart which for its age was excessively hardened in such matters.'

With the superpower of forgiveness we can make people whole even if just for a moment. *Here followed the story of a brief exchange I had with a former, unfriendly neighbor - the point was, all I could do was initiate a greeting and trust that the Holy Spirit would take my human gesture and touch his heart, although I will not ever know if this happened!*

When Jesus returns to grant peace to the disciples, they knew they did not deserve it, but He forgive them before they ask for his forgiveness. They had not demonstrated a change of behavior to deserve or earn his forgiveness. Jesus forgives in order that they will respond with changes of behavior, and they did! Only God can change someone from the inside out, and Jesus offers peace, the best and fullest relationship with God imaginable to prompt that change.

We don't want to live in a church or a society of cheap grace - where wrongs are glossed over without repentance and evil simply perpetuates. But we are called to trust and practice a new kind of love in Christ. This is a love that forgives in the hope that forgiveness will promote repentance and change behavior as a result of forgiving love, and holiness will replace evil in the end.